

# Understanding Loneliness and Social Isolation

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How to Stay Connected

From the National Institute on Aging at NIH





# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
What are Loneliness and Social Isolation? .....	5
How Can Being Isolated or Feeling Lonely Affect a Person’s Health?.....	8
How Do I Know if I Am at Risk?.....	13
What Can I Do To Stay Connected?.....	19
For More Information .....	24
Words To Know .....	30

Use the Table of Contents to help you find things quickly. Page 24 has a list of resources for more information about loneliness and social isolation. We also put some medical terms in bold, such as **inflammation**. You can find how to say these words and what they mean in the “Words To Know” section on page 30.



# Introduction

As people age, they often find themselves spending more time alone. This can affect your health and well-being. Everyone needs social connections to survive and thrive.

## **This booklet will help you learn about loneliness and social isolation:**

- What they are
- Health effects
- Risk factors
- How to stay connected if you or someone you love is isolated or feeling lonely



# Marvin's Story



After working 35 years as a teacher, Marvin looked forward to an active retirement with his wife, Sandra. For many years, they enjoyed traveling, spending time with their grandchildren, and socializing with friends. Then Sandra developed breast cancer and passed away. Marvin had a difficult time coping with her death and didn't feel like socializing with their friends or going out to do things on his own.

# What Are Loneliness and Social isolation?

The number of older adults age 65 and older is growing, and many are socially isolated and regularly feel lonely. The coronavirus outbreak in 2020 brought even more challenges due to health considerations and the need to practice **physical distancing**.

Social isolation and loneliness are different, but related. **Social isolation** is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly. **Loneliness** is the distressing feeling of being alone or separated. It's possible to feel lonely while among other people, and you can live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated.

Older adults are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness due to changes in health and social connections that can come with growing older, hearing, vision, and memory loss, disability, trouble getting around, and/or the loss of family and friends.



If you are in poor health, you may be more likely to be socially isolated or lonely. And, if you are socially isolated or feeling lonely, it can also put your physical and mental health at risk.

Adults who are lonely or socially isolated are less healthy, have longer hospital stays, end up readmitted to the hospital more often, and are more likely to die earlier than those with meaningful and supportive social connections.



## Staying Connected During COVID-19

With the COVID-19 pandemic (global outbreak), maintaining safe distancing precautions has been challenging for everyone — even people who are otherwise well-connected with large supportive social networks.

Public health guidelines to keep physical distance from others have slowed down the spread of COVID-19, but they have also made it harder for people to see family and friends. Older adults are at greater risk of COVID-19, but it is also critically important for them to maintain active social connections. Reach out by phone, video, text, social media, email, or letter to help everyone stay connected during this challenging time. Learn more at [www.coronavirus.gov](http://www.coronavirus.gov).



# How Can Being Isolated or Feeling Lonely Affect a Person's Health?

People who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to be admitted to nursing homes and the emergency room. Social isolation and loneliness also are associated with higher risks for:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Obesity
- Weakened immune functioning
- Anxiety
- Depression
- **Cognitive decline**
- **Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease**
- Death

People who are lonely or socially isolated may get too little exercise, drink too much alcohol, smoke, and often don't sleep well, which can increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and other serious conditions.

People who are lonely experience emotional pain. Losing a sense of connection and community can change the way a person sees the world. Someone experiencing **chronic** loneliness can feel threatened and mistrustful of others.

Emotional pain can activate the same stress responses in the body as physical pain. When this goes on for a long time, it can lead to chronic **inflammation** and reduced **immunity**. This raises your risk of chronic diseases and can leave a person more vulnerable to some infectious diseases.

Social isolation and loneliness may also be bad for brain health. Loneliness and social isolation have been linked to poorer cognitive function and higher risk for dementia, including and especially for Alzheimer's disease. Also, little social activity and being alone most of the time may contribute to a decline in the ability to perform everyday tasks such as driving, paying bills, taking medicine, and cooking.

## Tips for Staying Connected if You Are Living Alone With Dementia

If you or a loved one has dementia and lives alone, family members, friends, or other caregivers may be able to help in different ways.

- **Identify a person you trust, such as a neighbor**, who can visit you regularly in-person or via a video call, and be an emergency contact.
- **Learn about home- and community-based support and services** from social service agencies, local nonprofits, and Area Agencies on Aging.
- **Stay connected with family and friends** through video chats, email, and social media. If you're not tech savvy, ask for help to learn.
- **Talk with others who share common interests.**  
Try a support group online or in person. Maybe your community has a memory café you can visit — a safe place to enjoy activities and socialize for people living with memory loss and their families and caregivers.

## COVID-19 Precautions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, take precautions to protect yourself and others. Wash your hands often with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available. Stay at least 6 feet from people who are not in your household. Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face mask when around others. Always cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough, or use the inside of your elbow if you do not have a tissue. Frequently clean and disinfect surfaces that you frequently touch each day. Stay at home when you feel ill. Read more at [www.coronavirus.gov](https://www.coronavirus.gov).



## Elena's Story



Elena has been her father Oscar's caregiver ever since he was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. As Oscar's condition has worsened, Elena must do more to help, including helping him with bathing and dressing, taking him to the doctor, and preparing his meals. While she feels lucky to be caring for Oscar, Elena often feels overwhelmed and distant from her friends. She no longer has time to spend with them and is often too tired to do so even if she could.



# How Do I Know if I Am at Risk?

Those who find themselves unexpectedly isolated due to the illness of a loved one, separation from friends or family, loss of mobility, worsening vision or hearing problems, disability, or lack of mobility or access to transportation, are at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation.

You also may be at greater risk if you:

- Live alone
- Can't leave your home
- Had a major loss or life change, such as the death of a spouse or partner or retirement
- Struggle with money
- Are a caregiver
- Have psychological or cognitive challenges
- Have limited social support
- Live in a rural, unsafe, and/or hard-to-reach neighborhood
- Have language barriers where you live
- Experience age, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity discrimination where you live
- Are not meaningfully engaged in activities or are feeling a lack of purpose

## Hearing Loss Can Make It Harder To Stay Connected



People with hearing loss may find it hard to have conversations with friends and family.

Many older adults have difficulty hearing, but some may not want to admit it. Those who can't hear well may withdraw from others because they feel frustrated, become depressed, or embarrassed. Sometimes, older adults are mistakenly thought to be confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative when the reality is that they don't hear well.

Difficulties communicating with others can lead to less interaction with people, social isolation, and higher rates of loneliness.

Hearing problems that are ignored or untreated can get worse. If you have a hearing problem, see your doctor. Hearing aids, special training, certain medicines, and surgery are some of the treatments that can help. Read more at [www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing-loss-older-adults](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing-loss-older-adults).

## Dealing with Grief, Mourning, and Depression

Although it is normal to mourn when you have a loss, later life does not have to be a time of ongoing sadness or disconnection. Depression is a common problem among older adults, but it is *not* a normal part of aging. It is treatable, so let your doctor know about your feelings and ask about treatment.

It is especially important to get help with your loss to help prevent you from feeling overwhelmed. If you feel sad all the time, are unable to imagine life moving forward without your loved one, experience a general loss of interest in things you used to like to do, or if your sense of loss keeps you from doing your daily activities, let your doctor know. Also, tell your doctor about symptoms such as lack of energy, poor appetite, trouble sleeping, or little interest in life. These could be signs of **complicated grief** or depression, both of which can be treated.

Family and caring friends often can provide great support. There are also support groups where grieving people help each other. Also, remember to take good care of yourself: Try to eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, and do activities you enjoy.

## Talking With Your Doctor

If you are feeling isolated or lonely a lot of the time, you may want to tell your doctor or health professional. Talking about your health with your doctor means sharing information about how you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally. Describing your symptoms can help your doctor identify the problem. Make sure to bring up your concerns. For example, let your doctor know about any major changes or stresses in your life, such as a divorce or the death of a loved one.

As we grow older, we may lose people in our lives, including spouses and cherished friends. Or, we may have to move away from home or give up favorite activities. A doctor who knows about your losses is better able to understand how you are feeling. They can make suggestions that may be helpful to you.



Be open and honest with your doctor about your health habits and what's happening in your life. It will help them to understand your medical conditions and emotional health more fully and recommend the best treatment options for you. Learn more about doctor-patient communication at [www.nia.nih.gov/twyd](http://www.nia.nih.gov/twyd).

## Think You Might Be at Risk?

Check out this resource to learn more about loneliness and social isolation and take a quiz to see if you might be at risk for loneliness or social isolation: Expanding Your Circles: Prevent Isolation and Loneliness as you Age, <https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Resources/Brochures/docs/Expanding-Circles.pdf>

## Carla's Story



Since Carla started having trouble with her vision, she's had to give up driving and travels less often. But she still enjoys spending time with her three grandchildren, even though she lives in Maryland and they live across the country in California. Carla reads stories to them on video chat and catches up on how they are doing on social media. She also stays in touch with friends through email and weekly phone calls. Carla feels much happier knowing that she can stay connected with others.



# What Can I Do To Stay Connected?

There are things you can do to protect yourself or a loved one from the effects of loneliness and social isolation. First, it's important to take care of yourself. Exercise, eat healthy, get enough sleep, and pursue activities you enjoy to help manage stress and stay as mentally and physically healthy as possible.

It's also important to stay active and connect with others. People who engage in meaningful, productive activities they enjoy with others feel a sense of purpose and tend to live longer. Studies show these activities may help boost your mood and improve your well-being and cognitive function.

People who live an active lifestyle:

- Are less likely to develop certain diseases
- Have a longer lifespan
- Are happier and feel less depressed
- Are better prepared to cope with loss
- May be able to improve their thinking abilities

For example, helping others through volunteering helps you feel less lonely and allows you to have a sense of mission and purpose in life, which is linked to better health.

Here are some other ideas to help you stay connected:\*

- Find an activity that you enjoy, restart an old hobby, or take a class to learn something new. You might have fun and meet people with similar interests.
- Schedule time each day to stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors in person, by email, social media, voice call, or text. Talk with people you trust and share your feelings. Suggest an activity to help nurture and strengthen existing relationships. Sending letters or cards is another good way to keep up friendships.
- Use communication technologies such as video chat, smart speakers, or even companion robots to help keep you engaged and connected.
- If you're not tech-savvy, sign up for an online or in-person class at your local public library or community center to help you learn how to use email or social media.
- Consider adopting a pet if you are able to care for them. Animals can be a source of comfort and may also lower stress and blood pressure.

- Stay physically active and include group exercise, such as joining a walking club or working out with a friend. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes (2 1/2 hours) of activity a week that makes you breathe hard.
- Introduce yourself to your neighbors.
- Find a faith-based organization where you can deepen your spirituality and engage with others in activities and events.
- Check out resources and programs at your local social service agencies, community and senior centers, and public libraries.
- Join a cause and get involved in your community.

\*See page 11 for information to help you stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.



# The Benefits of Exercise

If you're feeling down, anxious, or stressed because you are lonely or isolated, one way to boost your mood is to get moving through exercise. Research has shown that exercise is not only good for your physical health; it also supports emotional and mental health. You can exercise with a friend and get the added benefit of emotional support.

Physical activity can help:

- Reduce feelings of depression and stress, while improving your mood and overall emotional well-being
- Increase your energy level
- Improve sleep
- Empower you to feel more in control



In addition, exercise and physical activity may possibly improve or maintain some aspects of cognitive function. Whether it's gardening, playing tennis, taking a walk in the park, kicking around a soccer ball with your grandchildren, or something else, choose an activity you enjoy.\*

\*See page 11 for information to help you stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are many things you can do to stay connected as you age. By staying active, participating in meaningful activities you enjoy, and maintaining relationships with others, you can help keep your brain active, avoid health problems, and feel less isolated and more engaged with the world around you.

# For More Information

## Federal Government Resources

### **NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center**

800-438-4380 (toll-free)

[adear@nia.nih.gov](mailto:adear@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers)

The National Institute on Aging's ADEAR Center offers information and publications for families, caregivers, and health professionals on Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, including information on caregiving, clinical trials, and research. Staff members answer inquiries by phone, email, and in writing and make referrals to local and national resources. Visit the ADEAR website to learn more about Alzheimer's and related dementias, find clinical trials, and sign up for email updates.

### **AmeriCorps Seniors**

800-942-2677

<https://americorps.gov>

Senior Corps is a network of national service programs for Americans age 55 and older, made of three primary programs: Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents, and RSVP. Senior Corps volunteers commit their time to address critical community needs including academic tutoring and mentoring, elderly care, disaster relief support, and more.



## **Eldercare Locator**

800-677-1116 (toll-free)  
eldercarelocator@n4a.org  
<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

This service of the Administration on Aging, of the Administration for Community Living, can help you find housing, support services, transportation, health and insurance, and benefits information in your local community.

## **Other Resources**

### **AARP**

888-687-2277 (toll-free)  
877-434-7598 (TTY/toll-free)  
member@aarp.org  
[www.aarp.org/caregiving](http://www.aarp.org/caregiving)

AARP provides resources and guidance for family caregivers on social isolation, in-home care, medical, financial, and legal considerations, and caregiver well-being.

### **Alzheimer's Association**

800-272-3900 (toll-free)  
866-403-3073 (TTY/toll-free)  
info@alz.org  
[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

The Alzheimer's Association provides information and support for people with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers including a 24-hour helpline for confidential support and information for those living with Alzheimer's disease, caregivers, families, and the public.

## **Connect2Affect**

<https://connect2affect.org>

Connect2Affect is an online resource to address social isolation and loneliness and increase awareness. It features tools, training resources, and information to help evaluate isolation risk and create networks.

### Isolation Assessment

<https://connect2affect.org/assessment/self>

This assessment can be done by an individual or a caregiver to help gauge how connected the person is. It also provides suggestions for resources that may help.

## **Family Caregiver Alliance**

800-445-8106 (toll-free)

[info@caregiver.org](mailto:info@caregiver.org)

[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

The Family Caregiver Alliance provides services to family caregivers of adults with physical and cognitive impairments, such as Parkinson's, stroke, Alzheimer's and other types of dementia, including assessment, care planning, direct care skills, wellness programs, respite services, and legal/financial consultation vouchers.

## **Meals on Wheels America**

888-998-6325 (toll-free)

[info@mealsonwheelsamerica.org](mailto:info@mealsonwheelsamerica.org)

[www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org](http://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org)

Meals on Wheels America provides home meal delivery services to people who have trouble getting out of their homes.

## **National Association of Area Agencies on Aging**

202-872-0888

[info@n4a.org](mailto:info@n4a.org)

[www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org)

This national network of Area Agencies on Aging provides resources and information for older adults and people with disabilities on health, safety, and staying connected.

## **National Council on Aging**

571-527-3900

[www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)

The National Council on Aging partners with nonprofit organizations, government, and businesses to provide innovative community programs and services, online help, and advocacy.

Center for Healthy Aging

[www.ncoa.org/center-for-healthy-aging](http://www.ncoa.org/center-for-healthy-aging)

Geri-Fit

[www.gerifit.com](http://www.gerifit.com)

Healthy Moves

[www.eblcprograms.org/evidence-based/  
recommended-programs/healthy-moves](http://www.eblcprograms.org/evidence-based/recommended-programs/healthy-moves)

Fit & Strong!

[www.fitandstrong.org](http://www.fitandstrong.org)

## **SilverSneakers**

866-584-7389 (toll free)

[support@silversneakers.com](mailto:support@silversneakers.com)

[www.silversneakers.com](http://www.silversneakers.com)

SilverSneakers is a community fitness program for older adults that offers exercise classes, workouts, how-to videos, and workshops.

## **YMCA**

800-872-9622

[fulfillment@ymca.net](mailto:fulfillment@ymca.net)

[www.ymca.net/healthy-living/programs-for-older-adults](http://www.ymca.net/healthy-living/programs-for-older-adults)

The YMCA offers evidence-based group exercise programs for older adults to improve fitness and prevent falls.

# To Learn More About Health and Aging

## National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

[niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

Visit **[www.nia.nih.gov/health](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health)** to find more health and aging information from the National Institute on Aging at NIH and subscribe to email alerts. Visit **<https://order.nia.nih.gov>** to order free print publications.

# Words To Know

## Alzheimer's Disease

(pronounced **allz**-high-merz duh-**zeez**)

A disease that causes large numbers of nerve cells in the brain to die. People with this disease lose the ability to remember, think, and make good judgments. The symptoms begin slowly and get worse over time.

## Chronic

(pronounced **kron**-ik)

A condition that continues for a long time or recurs over time.

## Cognitive Decline

(pronounced **kog**-ni-tiv dih-**klahyn**)

A medical condition that causes people to have more memory problems than other people their age. The signs are not as severe as those of Alzheimer's disease. They include forgetting to go to events and appointments, and having more trouble coming up with the right words than other people the same age.

## Complicated Grief

(pronounced **kom**-pli-key-tid greef)

A condition in which people who have lost a close loved one may be unable to comprehend the loss, experience intense, prolonged grief, and have trouble resuming their own life.



## **Dementia**

(pronounced duh-**men**-shuh)

A loss of cognitive functioning. This means changes to a person's thinking, remembering, reasoning, and behavior that make daily life and activities difficult to manage.

## **Immunity**

(pronounced ih-**myoo**-ni-tee)

The ability to resist or fight off a disease.

## **Inflammation**

(pronounced in-fluh-**mey**-shuhn)

Inflammation includes heat, swelling, and redness caused by the body's protective response to injury or infection. Inflammation that occurs in healthy tissues or lasts too long can be harmful.

## **Loneliness**

(pronounced **lohn**-lee-nes)

The distressing feeling of being alone or separated.

## **Physical Distancing**

(pronounced **fiz**-i-kuhl **dis**-tuhns-ing)

The act of keeping a safe space between yourself and other people who are not from your household. To practice physical distancing, stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) from other people in both indoor and outdoor spaces who are not from your household.

## **Social Isolation**

(pronounced **soh**-shuhl ahy-suh-**ley**-shuhn)

The lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly.



Share this booklet with friends and family so they can understand more about loneliness and social isolation and staying connected.



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